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NSC FOR D.FISK
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/07/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PINS](#) [PARM](#) [BL](#)
SUBJECT: FIRESTORM OVER EMBASSY CUTTING SUPPORT FOR
BOLIVIAN COUNTER-TERRORISM UNIT

REF: A. USDAO LA PAZ IIR ID 6808-9632-06

- [1](#)B. USDAO LA PAZ 6808-9748-06
- [1](#)C. USDAO LA PAZ 6808-9847-06
- [1](#)D. USDAO LA PAZ 6808-9846-06
- [1](#)E. USDAO LA PAZ 6808-9890-06
- [1](#)F. TD-314/62437-05
- [1](#)G. TD-314/62541-05

Classified By: Ambassador David N. Greenlee for reasons 1.4(d) and (b).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: In response to our ending support for a specialized Bolivian military counter-terrorism (CT) unit, President Evo Morales publicly blasted the U.S. for interfering in Bolivia's internal affairs. The decision to sever ties with the outfit was taken after the GOB appointed as commander a military officer who had previously leaked sensitive information to the press, among other indiscretions, but the media have portrayed it as reflecting a broader U.S. dissatisfaction with the new Bolivian government's policies. The Ambassador met with journalists March 7 to provide a detailed background briefing to clarify the issue. Severing ties with the unit was the culmination of a six month dialog with successive GOB's about our lack of confidence in the CT team's leadership. The expected political blowback, now a reality, may reflect both real and manufactured outrage at U.S. "arrogance," but does not undermine the fundamental prudence of our action. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) On March 3, we formally conveyed the decision to end support for the Bolivian military's specialized counter-terrorism unit: the Joint Counter-Terrorism Force ("Fuerza Contraterrorista Conjunta"). For the past three years, the Embassy has backed the confidential Bolivian CT force with training, equipment and other cooperation, such as facilitating annual joint exercises with the counterpart CT forces in the region. In the view of its U.S. military colleagues, the Bolivian CT unit was highly disciplined, competent and capable under its past leadership -- a genuine

professional elite within Bolivia's relatively undistinguished armed forces.

13. (S) Despite the team's relative professionalism, however, Embassy MilGroup liaison officers repeatedly expressed discontent with the performance of its deputy commander, Lieutenant Colonel Rory Rodriguez, beginning in September 2005. Rodriguez had a tendency to stray dangerously from established U.S. tactical doctrine, was not respected by his subordinates, and, perhaps most damningly, had leaked to the press sensitive information in connection with the transfer of Bolivia's Chinese-manufactured MANPADS to the U.S. (Refs F and G). Milgroup and other Embassy officers repeatedly underscored, both to the administrations of then-President Rodriguez and of President Morales, the difficulty we would have in maintaining support for the unit if LTC Rodriguez remained in a leadership position.

14. (C) Our warnings aside, Rodriguez was appointed interim commander in early December, toward the close of the presidential elections, according to some reports, in response to pressure from then front-running candidate Morales as a reward for the lieutenant colonel's "heroic" actions in the Chinese missile case. Embassy officers protested the appointment to the outgoing government and Rodriguez was removed from command. In early February 2006, however, the new Morales administration reinstated Rodriguez. In a March 3 letter to the head of Bolivia's armed forces, BG Wilfredo Vargas, we noted our lack of confidence in the CT unit's leadership and announced an immediate end to our support, including calling back Bolivian officers being trained in the U.S. and requesting the return of U.S. military equipment donated to the force.

15. (C) Formal Embassy communications on this matter were conducted within the relevant (sensitive) military-to-military channels, but once the information got to the government it quickly broke out of those channels and burst into public view. During a March 6 community celebration in El Alto, President Morales, referring to the confidential Embassy communication, took the opportunity to

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blast U.S. "interference" in Bolivia's internal affairs and to denounce U.S. "blackmail." Copies of the Embassy letter to the GOB were provided to the press, and showed up in several March 7 morning newspapers. "The time when the United States appoints Ministers and Commanders is over," Morales railed. Morales also noted that a lowly Colonel had transmitted the message, and not the U.S. Ambassador, insinuating that a dreadful breach of protocol had taken place. According to March 7 news reports, Morales also said Bolivia would refuse the Embassy's request to return the U.S. military equipment used by the CT unit. In a March 7 written response to the Embassy, Armed Forces Commander Vargas said the formal U.S. communication needed to be made through the proper "diplomatic" channels.

16. (C) Notwithstanding the real, somewhat narrow reasons behind the Embassy's decision, it appears to have struck an emotional nerve (or, alternatively, to serve the needs of Bolivia's anti-American establishment) and, consequently, has been blown significantly out of proportion by Bolivians inside and outside of the government. The media have portrayed it as reflecting a broader U.S. dissatisfaction with the new Bolivian government's policies, and even as intending to punish the Morales administration for undetermined wrongs. In a March 7 background briefing with two dozen journalists, the Ambassador clarified the facts, placed the episode in its appropriate military-to-military context, and hoped the situation could be rectified to facilitate continued U.S.-Bolivian cooperation in the important counterterrorism arena. He also drew attention to the Bolivian government's persistently confusing signals with respect to our broader bilateral relations.

17. (C) Comment: The March 3 letter was the culmination of

six months dialog with successvie GOB's about our lack of confidence in the CT unit's commander. Political backlash has been stiff, at least initially, and may reflect some real anger on the part of President Morales, always quick to perceive slights, but also mirrors broader anti-U.S. sentiment among some of his closest advisors. At the same time, appointing Rodriguez as commander against our well-known objections politicized an otherwise well-trained, lethal unit, and resurrected memories of a similar police unit that went rogue in February 2003 with fatal results. With Rodriguez in place, we are better off without it.

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